



06 JUN, 2020

LORE AND ORDER OF POLICE WORK



Herald Sun, Melbourne

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**G**RAHAM Ashton is 20 days from finishing one of the toughest gigs in public life. The job of Victoria Police Chief Commissioner inevitably presents big challenges but Mr Ashton's term has been particularly eventful. The coronavirus, Lawyer X scandal, Cardinal George Pell's controversial prosecution and the relentless counter-terror fight have dominated the news cycle. The emerging extent of his members' mental health problems, the widespread scourge of ice and organised crime's influence have remained big issues. Then, in April, the force was rocked when four police officers were killed on the Eastern Freeway. Mr Ashton this week spoke to the *Herald Sun* in a wide-ranging final interview.



**MARK BUTTLER**

## THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

"IT'S unprecedented for us. We found ourselves policing in a way we've never had to before, which we've found at times really challenging. You're going out trying to regulate behaviour you're normally in favour of. People going fishing or gathering in a park, playing soccer, basketball and things. It's been a completely different relationship that we've had to work on with the community. We've had fines that are over the top. We've had to pull

them back, withdraw them. The members themselves haven't had to do it before and they've had to work out where discretion lies."

## TODAY'S POLICING ENVIRONMENT

"IT'S immeasurably tougher. The issues police are facing on the front line are far more complex and, I think, dangerous, than police faced years ago. Police rammings, police assaulted, police being spat on. It's just a normal weekly event. It didn't used to be. It's a more challenging job than it ever used to be, hence the need for us to be focusing

on safety."

## THE ICE SCOURGE

"THE complexity for police with ice is that some people, when they take it, have a

violent episode. That can lead to injuries to the community. That can lead to injuries to the police. In things like road trauma, it can lead to really horrendous results.

"When we had the heroin boom, people who were on heroin were mostly looking for a place to curl up. It's different with ice. They're out



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and agitated. People are seeing the damage it's doing in the community and that's having a suppressing effect on people wanting to use it.

"People are more aware now of the sort of risks ice is presenting, particularly in rural communities where it rips the heart out of the community."

### THE TOUGHEST DAY

MR Ashton said losing four members on April 22 in the Eastern Freeway truck crash was a major low point.

"Any time that members die, whether it's through illness or workplace injury or, in this case, in such a horrendous manner, it's always tough. Having four members in one location

killed is just horrendous."

But Mr Ashton said the community response to the tragedy was heartening.

"It activated the vast majority of our people, who do appreciate what the police do and the risks police have to take every day to keep the community safe. You can get a very noisy twittersphere in the other direction at times but, the fact is, that the majority of people do understand the challenges the police are

dealing with. That terrible incident was an opportunity for the community to step up and they did that in droves. The fact that around the country monuments, significant places, were lit up in blue, I think that was the vast majority of the community reaching out ... very heartening to know."

### COUNTER-TERRORISM

"THE returning foreign

fighters issue will be the principal issue on that

traditional terrorism front for us. But what we need to be alert for in this period ahead is the other forms of terrorism which can start to emerge.

We've got a very good counter-terrorism command. It's been passing the test for a while. We've had Bourke St and Brighton. We had the Christmas Eve (terror plot), which we managed to disrupt. That would have been dreadful for the city if it had been allowed to play out."

### AFRICAN YOUTH GANGS

"IT hasn't gone away. It's still occurring on a regular basis. One of the benefits we've got in that area is that it's a small group within a larger, largely law-abiding African

community that are really the troublemakers.

We know who they are so we can regularly get to them before they're doing a lot of offending. You'd have a run of home invasions, you might have a group doing 10 or 15 before we caught them whereas now we'll catch them after one or two."

### LAWYER X

"OBVIOUSLY, it hasn't helped to have a royal commission running for 18 months into the matter.

We've already put a lot of things in place to try and make sure those things can't reoccur. We had underworld killings, people being shot all over the place. The risk to life, the risk to innocent civilians was considerable at the time. There was a lot of pressure on

police ... to deal with that. It was a high-pressure crime environment back then that people can lose sight of. That doesn't excuse doing anything wrong but it's important that it's understood in that context."

### GEORGE PELL

MR Ashton labelled claims police put a target on Cardinal George Pell's back "complete rubbish".

"When a police force receives allegations and those allegations are serious, we examine them.

"If we find there's sufficient information to warrant an investigation, then we do it. It doesn't matter who it relates to. And it shouldn't matter.

"We've got a job to do and, in that case, our job was to investigate it and we prepared

a brief of evidence. The matter went to legal opinion, it went to committal hearing, it went through two trials and it went through an appeals court and was upheld.

"To then want to say it was some kind of police witch-hunt, well, I think that puts that to bed."

### HIS SIX-WEEK BREAK IN 2017

"I HAD been burning the candle at three ends. I'd been going around telling the whole workforce you need to speak up if you're struggling, to take time off, get healthy, so I felt I needed to explain what I was doing.

"I could have just taken leave and shut up and said nothing and no one would have probably been the wiser ... but I didn't think that was

very honest. So I spoke up and tried to send a message.

"I've been good since. I've made a number of changes in my life in terms of thinking about things other than work and picking up a couple of hobbies I'd dropped off.

"You end up just working and you suddenly find you've gone through a year and not spoken to any of your friends."



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Justice and Community Safety

### WORK-LIFE BALANCE

“YOU go home, you have dinner, you sit in the chair watching TV. The phone’s going. Alerts are going off. We had a couple of people found dead in the street last night. They were two suburbs apart, same age, you’re just thinking ... what’s going on here? Even while you’re watching *The Voice* you’re still doing work.

It’s a seven-day-a-week thing.”

### CAREER REGRETS

“THERE were some police suicides of people that were close to me where I regret not picking up signs. Cases where I regret not being clever enough, attuned enough to pick up that they were obviously really struggling.

“When you’re the Chief Commissioner, you feel things more personally in terms of community harm.

“So when things happen there’s an element of blaming yourself — it’s happened on your watch. People have been killed, members of the

community are the victims of some vicious crime. You do feel partly a sense of guilt.

“You have the opportunity to change a lot of people’s lives for the better and you do that and you can take a lot of satisfaction when you are able to help people, but when it goes the other way and people suffer, you feel that as well.”

### POLITICS IN POLICING

“I’VE always sought to stay out of matters political. You get accused of everything. You’re either too soft or you’re too hard. You’re coming down too hard. You’re not doing enough. Policing is

a bit like haircuts and sporting teams — everyone’s got an opinion. All you can do is your best because you’re never going to please everybody.”

### LAWS HE'D LIKE TO SEE CHANGED

“RATHER than specific laws, you want to make sure governments are invested in listening to the police voice about when things are not working.

“It’s always important that government is listening to that police voice about different laws. This government has been very good in terms of listening to us and trying to deal with issues when we’ve been raising them. It’s important that continues.”

### OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANGS

“SETTING up of taskforce Echo was critical in establishing police with the right expertise in understanding and dealing with bikies and making sure the community understands these aren’t well-meaning motorcycle enthusiasts. You’re talking about career criminals who do a great deal of community harm. We’ve got a lot of police dedicated to that work and that’ll continue. We’ve just got to be on them the whole time.”

### HIS FUTURE

“IT’S a five-year highwire act and you want to make sure you don’t fall off the highwire with a month to go. You’ve got to be on the ball here every day. Thinking about what’s next is a bit of a distraction. I thought I’ll focus on this to the final siren then I’ll think about it after that.”



LYNETTE TAYLOR



JOSHUA PRESTNEY



KEVIN KING



GLEN HUMPHRIS



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**NICOLA GOBBO**





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GEORGE PELL COURT DATE



SISTO MALASPINA MEMORIAL